City College SEEK Student Gains Valuable Experience as a Watson Fellow

Google Alexa Mieses, a 21-year-old member of the SEEK program at City College, and the first entry that pops up is an article she wrote while serving as a Jeannette K. Watson Fellow summer intern at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, Inc. (GMHC).

I was interested in interning at GMHC because I wanted experience in public policy," said Alexa, who is a senior majoring in biology. "At this juncture, I’m considering pursuing an MD and Master’s in Public Health. My work over the summer strengthened that desire. It was an eye opener."

The Jeannette K. Watson Fellowship provides internships, mentoring, and enriched educational opportunities to 15 promising New York City undergraduates each year, with the goal of increasing their life choices and developing their capacity to make a difference in their own and others’ lives. Forty-five students serve as Watson Fellows at any one time.

Professor Kennedy said “She’s really trying to make herself as well-rounded as possible, and she takes advantage of the myriad of opportunities out there." Professor Kennedy, who has been a counselor for 17 years, said of her work. "Very rewarding, particularly when you see students like Alexa come through. Without the SEEK program, she wouldn’t have been able to enter City College.”

Also with Professor Kennedy’s encouragement and support, Alexa applied for and received a Watson scholarship to study abroad in Madrid, Spain, after her freshman year, became involved with the Minority Association of Pre-health Students, serving as its secretary her junior year and now its president, and was named a SEEK Scholar her sophomore year, which has given her the opportunity to mentor other SEEK students and assist with seminars. Alexa also tutors students in biology and chemistry through the City College Academy of Professional Preparation for Science Majors.

Alexa, who was born and raised in Astoria, Queens, graduated from the Bronx High School of Science but nearly went to LaGuardia High School because she is as passionate about the arts as she is about science. She’s been tap dancing for 17 years, said of her work, “It’s very rewarding, particularly when you see students like Alexa come through. Without the SEEK program, she wouldn’t have been able to enter City College.”

Alexa authored policy briefs about sex education and teens and drugs and inspired her to pursue a career in medicine. Alexa applied for the Watson Fellowship because she is as passionate about the arts as she is about science. She’s been tap dancing for 17 years, said of her work, “It’s very rewarding, particularly when you see students like Alexa come through. Without the SEEK program, she wouldn’t have been able to enter City College.”

Alexa was named a Watson Fellow in 2008 following a rigorous application and interview process. Watson Fellows are placed in paid internships for two summers and the third summer the students travel abroad. Her first internship was as a summer teaching fellow at the Bronx Zoo where she taught children of all ages about biology and ecology. This summer Alexa is considering internships in Central or South America.

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College Discovery Helps Hostos Student Become a Kaplan Scholar

Norberto Tavares Garcia, a College Discovery participant who graduated from Hostos Community College last spring with a 3.7 GPA, has been named a Kaplan Leadership Scholar and awarded a scholarship to New York University.

I decided to get involved with the program because I want to teach, and I saw this as a great opportunity,” said Rhagina, a 22-year-old English major who plans to get her master’s degree in education. “By working with students and teaching them, sometimes I get hugs. It just makes you feel good on the inside.”

Strategies for Success, which was started by the SEEK Program and is now open to all students at the college, offers mentoring, tutoring, and college role models to 200 youngsters in after-school programs at P.S. 57 and I.S. 49. The college students function as tutors by helping students with homework or studying for a test, and as mentors by sitting down with students and discussing their interests and passing activities such as poetry workshops. About 40 percent of the participants in Strategies for Success are SEEK students, most of whom are also education majors.

Rhagina, a SEEK participant who graduated from Port Richmond High School in Staten Island, previously tutored her younger sister and god sister at home. Her college mentoring career began at I.S. 49 in 2007, and soon she was working with students that had been placed in special education classes because of behavioral problems. Rhagina said she succeeded by sitting down and getting to know each student. She connected to the girls by talking about fashion or telling them about her dance classes at the College of Staten Island, and to the boys by talking about sports. “I try to get down on their level,” she said. “They can see they have a friend, a college role model and a mentor.”

In September 2008, Rhagina was promoted to site coordinator for I.S. 49 and assistant site coordinator at P.S. 57, which has allowed her to develop leadership skills. Although she supervises 12 SEEK mentors, she has a master’s degree in psychology at I.S. 49. In 2012 SEEK mentors Tuesday and Thursday at P.S. 57, she said it isn’t difficult because her peers are so motivated. “The mentors are self-starters,” Rhagina said. “They have the same passion I have to serve the community and help these children succeed in life and encourage them to go to college.”

Georgia Landrum, Assistant Director of Strategies for Success, said the program is designed to address the needs of the children and give SEEK students the opportunity to serve their community by becoming role models. The college students arrange for a bus to take mentors to the schools so they can participate between classes.

“A lot of SEEK students want to give back,” Ms. Landrum said. “They are helping these children who are financially and academically disadvantaged by giving them their time and passion. A lot of the kids being mentored don’t know anyone in college and our college students provide them with role models.”

Mentors are required to take a week-long mentoring workshop that teaches them how to mentor and tutor, and they learn valuable study skills that they can apply to their own classes. To qualify, mentors must have at least a 2.75 GPA, 24 more college credits, and basic skills proficiency. “It’s really a nice experience for them beyond the classroom,” Ms. Landrum said. “All of them are going into education and they’re able to put into practice what they learn.”

Strategies for Success was launched at I.S. 49 in 2001 in partnership with the Jewish Community Center’s Beacon Program. The Staten Island Bank and Trust Foundation (now the Staten Island Foundation) selected the College of Staten Island to help children struggling academically in the Stapleton area and provided the founding grant. In 2004, the program was expanded to P.S. 57 in partnership with the YMCA’s after-school program. Grants totaling $90,000, including a $25,000 grant from JP Morgan Chase and a $40,000 grant from the Staten Island Foundation, have enabled the program to continue.
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When asked if he was ever challenged, Norberto said, “I moved from a tree and suffered a spinal cord injury that left me paralyzed from the waist down and unable to finish his senior year of high school. After several surgeries, Norberto moved with his family in 2006 to the United States, where he learned English, passed the GED test, took college prep classes, and was accepted to the College Discovery Program at Hostos Community College.

Norberto said his injury, which forced him to use a wheelchair initially and now a walker, has helped him relate to other people with disabilities. “I learned that there is nothing impossible in life if we work hard and give our heart to get it, recognizing that we must be dedicated, motivated and accept that nothing is easy,” Norberto wrote in his Kaplan application essay.

At Hostos, Norberto served as president of the Disability Awareness Club, was a member of the Committee on Disabilities Issues, and worked on campus in the Services for Students with Disabilities Office. He also represented the college at CUNY’s SEEK and College Discovery Programs’ Leadership conference, was inducted into Phi Theta Kappa, and honored with the College Discovery Program’s Academic Excellence Award in 2007, 2008, and 2009. Norberto is continuing his studies in NYU’s Silver School of Social Work and is interested in working with people with disabilities. “Social work is my passion,” he said. “I love working with people with disabilities.”

Rachel A. Giacca, Director of the College Discovery Program at Hostos Community College, beams with pride when speaking of Norberto. “Norberto is a wonderful young man,” said Rachel. “He’s made so much progress. He is physically challenged and walks with a walker, but when he came to us he was in a wheelchair. Some of our best students are disabled and they seem to have a tremendous will to move on.”

CSI’s Strategies for Success Taps Into Students Desire to Serve Community

Rhagina Chisolm always dreamed of becoming a teacher, so when the College of Staten Island’s SEEK Program offered her the chance to mentor and tutor students in the local public schools, she took advantage of it.

“The program provided a lot of opportunities and I took advantage of all of them,” she said. For example, Norberto worked on his Kaplan application with professors in the Life Skills Compass Project, which was developed by the College Discovery staff at Hostos to help students with a 3.0 GPA or higher create a portfolio to use when applying for scholarships. The portfolio consists of a cover letter, academic resume, scholarship essay, and references. In addition, the College Discovery professors help students prepare for interviews. An added benefit is participants can apply the skills they learn in the Life Skills Compass Project to their other coursework.

“College Discovery was like a family to me, also it was like a team where I got a lot of support,” Norberto said. “This year I never felt alone.”

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For Norberto, “College Discovery was very important in my educational career,” Norberto said. “The first semester I never felt alone.”

A number of students in the College of Staten Island’s SEEK Program for two years, was acknowledged in Professor Alan Zimmerman’s recent co-authored publication, The Economics of Counterfeit Trade.

Rhagina, a SEEK participant who graduated from Port Richmond High School in Staten Island, previously tutored her younger sister and god sister at Hostos Community College, and to the boys by talking about sports. “I try to get down on their level,” she said. “They can see they have a friend, a college role model and in it.”

In September 2008, Rhagina was promoted to site coordinator for PS 49 and assistant site coordinator for PS 57, which has allowed her to develop leadership skills. Although she supervises 12 SEEK mentees and manages a graduate psychology education internship and sometimes we get hugs. It just makes you feel good on the inside.”

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Also with Professor Kennedy’s encouragement and support, Alexa applied for and received a SEEK scholarship to study abroad in Madrid, Spain, after her freshman year, became involved with the Minority Association of Pre-Health. Students, serving as its secretary her junior year and now its president, and was named a SEEK Scholar her sophomore year, which has given her the opportunity to mentor other SEEK students and assist with seminars. Alexa also tutors students in biology and chemistry through the City College Academy of Professional Preparation for Science Majors. Alexa, who was born and raised in Arizona, Queens, graduated from the Bronx High School of Science Majors.

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